

RE: Bill C-81, An Act to ensure a Barrier-Free Canada

Margaret Lumchick's Story

It is my understanding that Bill C-81 has now been sent to the senate for consideration. I am writing in support of that legislation. Since I have no expertise in writing legislation, nor the rules that govern its implementation, I am forwarding to you a letter drafted by OWN (Older Women's Network) outlining some of the problems with the legislation as it now stands. If it is passed as it is with "no teeth" and many exemptions, it will be merely window dressing that will do little to address the lifelong barriers many of us have faced on a daily basis and the thousands more who are joining our ranks daily as a result of an accident, a disabling disease, stroke, or just the normal aging process.

A particular problem is appropriate housing. This is acute in the aging sector. To put a face to the problem, I hope you will take the time to read a short history of my struggles with accessibility, especially in the rental housing market. In 1949, at the age of 10 years, I contracted the polio virus. After an original two-year hospital stay I was in and out of hospitals for multiple surgeries for weeks, sometimes months, until the age of 17 when I was permanently discharged. I ambulated with braces and crutches and later used a wheelchair part-time. This ended with a surgical injury resulting from being catapulted out of the wheelchair, leaving me permanently wheelchair-bound. Within seconds I went from being able to navigate narrow hallways and doors to being physically banned from these areas. Hundreds of people daily, through no fault of their own after suffering a stroke or accident, or simply needing stability to prevent a fall, are being banned from their homes simply because doorways and hallways are not navigable with a walker or wheelchair.

I had always struggled with access issues in education, employment, transportation, and housing, even access to shopping and entertainment. Over the years many of these have been at least partially addressed. The housing issue, which is at the very core of daily existence, remains a seriously under-addressed issue especially for those of us who are financially independent and live on our own without supports. Finding a wheelchair-accessible rental unit in an "ordinary" apartment building is akin to winning the lottery. Yes, there are some units but most of these are in subsidized buildings and often in a "ghettoized" setting accommodating only the most severely compromised. There will always be a need for these specialized units and certainly I'm not downplaying that reality. What I'm referring to here is basic accessibility that need not look "different." It means a minimum of access so that the space can be used by everyone regardless of their age or physical condition. An architect just needs to be creative in planning the space, always keeping in mind the changing needs of the inhabitants over time so that major adjustments in living arrangements don't have to be made because one simply needs to now use a walker.

Back to me. I am now in the fortunate position of being able to own my own living space, and so have been at liberty to widen doorways and make other adjustments either out of necessity or convenience. Now having reached the age of 80 I have been contemplating selling my unit and moving into a rental mainly, I must say, to make it simpler for those in charge to wind down the estate. I'm not interested in the lifestyle, nor can I afford the \$5,000 to \$10,000 monthly fees for

a retirement home. I wish to maintain my total independence and I am still able to do so. Any place that I have inquired about, or seen, has not even come close to being able to accommodate even my basic access needs.

I am fortunate in being able to “stay in place.” I am not homeless, nor do I have to resort to living in a long-term care residence — at the present time at least. I have a choice but many with new disabilities find themselves in a situation where they are forced to move out of their accommodations and into long-term care facilities simply because of access problems. Bill C-81, with the recommended adjustments, will go a long way toward addressing the housing crises for many individuals in the future.

Elected representatives are often reluctant to impose strict regulations on those from whom they depend for substantial political contributions. The senate, not being an elected body, is free from that restraint. It is my hope that each and every one of you will consider this carefully and make the appropriate adjustments so that Bill C-81 will make a real change in the lives of all Canadians, maybe even to your own life or that of someone you care for.

Bill C-81 received royal assent on June 21, 2019.